

## AD WATCH

## Cigarette marketing in Senegal, West Africa

Though several actors who played Marlboro men have died of lung cancer and the industry they worked for is waning in popularity in the United States, the raw, masculine, American cowboy image of the Marlboro man is alive, well, and thriving in Senegal, West Africa. One can credit this newfound popularity to Senegalese admiration for the United States and obsession with anything "American". The Marlboro man has big plans to explore this new frontier and he is using the millions of Senegalese who dream of reaching his home country to his advantage.

The tobacco industry has found ways to infiltrate almost all facets of Senegalese life. Most store counters sport the Marlboro man's image along with the phrase "The cigarette sold most around the world!" Camel advertises itself on automobiles as "the taste of action" and plays up the fact it is "made in the USA!" Traditional healers in one of the main markets (Tileen) of the capital city Dakar, spread their dried crocodile heads, cowrie shells, and powders under the shade of a Marlboro sun umbrella. L&M brand relies on the good ol' stars and stripes, some smiling "healthy" twenty-somethings, and the phrase "The real American taste!"

During my seven-month stay in Senegal in 1996, I found the blatant cigarette pushing by corporations with origins in my own country vile, insidious, and immoral. Most enraging was the way in which cigarette marketing used and perpetuated the myth that all Americans smoke. It is a stealthy campaign to "convert" all Africans to the ranks of faithful smokers.

I undertook a small, exploratory research project as part of my work for the University of Minnesota Studies in International Development Program and the Senegalese-based development organisation, ENDA-Tiers



*A typical convenience store counter in Dakar, Senegal.*



*Sandaga market in the heart of Dakar.*



*Macho Marlboro man plugs American cigarettes once again.*

Monde. My research took place in N'Diabene Toube, a rural Wolof village (population 1580) in close proximity to St Louis on the northwest coast. Of the 30 men I interviewed, seven were currently smoking, six had done so in the past, and 17 had never smoked. Dunhill and Marlboro were the most popular brands for current smokers, with one youth pledging allegiance to the brand Excellence. All said they smoked between two and three cigarettes a day, at a cost of approximately five cents per cigarette. Though this amount may seem paltry, many said the average household income per month was less than \$40, an amount often needed to provide for upwards of 20 people.

The young men offered a variety of reasons for starting to smoke. These included "to charm the girls", "Smoking is the *mieux conseil*" (best counsel), smoking is part of the "*le monde de jeunesse*" (the world of youth), and



"L&M. The real American taste. Go for it!" Thies, Senegal.



Bag vending near the Dakar fishmarket.

men want to imitate "*le monde occidental*" (the West), specifically the European and American "*la mode de vie*" (lifestyle) which they see played out in many films. Women, one noted, know less of what goes on in other countries. Others attributed intelligence and sophistication to smoking. One said that he chose Marlboro specifically because it is "the cigarette with the highest sales in the world," adding he started because smoking is good for easing one's problems.

When asked why many more men than women smoke, many informants said that society judges women who smoke. Women who smoke carry a negative reputation not associated with smoking men. One 25-year-old non-smoker said that female smokers are "*mal vue*" (seen badly) and are thought to be sexually promiscuous. An equally common response was "men just like to smoke more than women", although a significant number admitted that many parents won't let their daughters smoke, while having no control over their sons' behaviour. A non-smoker said that

if a man catches his daughter smoking, he will beat her. Another noted that "women know smoking is bad for the heart". In Dakar, I observed that many more women smoked than in the village, behaviour which is probably connected to greater Westernisation and more disposable income. A 24-year-old smoker said that men smoke more than women because they have more problems, such as having to provide food for the household.

Most informants, both smokers and non-smokers, were able to list numerous health problems associated with tobacco. They were, in order of frequency mentioned, from high to low: cancer, lung and respiratory problems, sickness and bad health in general, heart problems, coughing, lung cancer specifically, loss of appetite, weakness, and "it shortens your life". One said that smoking takes money away from food and another said it "wastes money". All the men who had already quit smoking said that they had done so for health reasons or that it no longer offered them benefit.

Informants were asked to list five places where they had seen advertisements for smoking. Twenty-two out of 30 named television. Other popular responses were radio, billboards, stores, posters, and newspapers. Senegal passed legislation against tobacco advertising in 1985, including a ban on such advertising on TV. Much of this legislation has been altered or disregarded. This is both revealing about the state of legislation and ironic, as I knew of only two television sets in the entire village (which has no running water, electricity, or telephones!) One 20-year-old smoker said he had never seen anything against cigarettes on television, with the exception of a French organisation which spoke out against it. The government controls television broadcasting.

In the United States, corporations use African Americans in their advertisements when they want to attract African American customers. In contrast, I would estimate that at least 90% of all cigarette billboards in Senegal show Caucasians only, a striking phenomenon in a country whose only light-skinned people are essentially albino or tourists. About half of the informants said that this was because foreigners make and sell the cigarettes. One 18-year-old non-smoker guessed it was because Caucasians make "better photos", whereas another said the Western advertising industry is better. A 19-year-old non-smoker said that the advertisements show that "white people like to smoke". Three informants said, along these lines, that Africans look up to Americans and want to copy them.

When asked why Marlboro was "the cigarette with the highest world sales", the majority—smokers and non-smokers—said it was because of its good taste. Others said it was because it was the oldest cigarette and that it was advertised more than other brands. The rest attributed the brand's global success to: having the best advertisements, global marketing, being American, being the most known,



Waterfront billboard in Dakar.



"Camel—the taste of action" amidst shoe repairmen in Dakar.

and having a filter. As a 40-year-old non-smoker said, Marlboro has good sales

because it comes from America, "a great nation", and people connect the cigarette with its country of origin.

Finally, informants were asked to estimate the percentage of smokers in the United States compared with Senegal. Estimates of American smoking prevalence ranged from very low to universal, with an average estimating that about 60% smoked. Half the informants said that the American government thought cigarettes were bad. Six said the opposite, two of whom specified that the American government liked to export cigarettes because it aided "development" of the United States.

My research was too small in scale to be statistically meaningful, but it provides some preliminary insights into the specific reasons, attitudes, and beliefs held about smoking by the Senegalese. Tobacco corporations are obviously already taking these beliefs and attitudes into account when designing their marketing strategies. I would argue that these aspects are vitally important in efforts to design a counter-acting anti-smoking campaign. Smoking should not be associated with youth, sexual attraction, sophistication, or the United States, but it is. It is these false notions we need to uproot so that people in low-income countries can empower themselves to resist the death-dealing mascots of the tobacco industry.

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